



# Mule Deer Update



Vol. 2, Issue 1

## ATVs and Hunting: Impacts to Mule Deer

Randy Smith, Regional Wildlife Manager, Idaho Department of Fish and Game, Magic Valley Region

The use of ATV's and motorbikes has increased astronomically in recent years. In 2005 more than 104,000 ATV's and motorbikes were registered in Idaho; a 75% increase from 2001. Today an estimated 33% of Idahoans participate in off-highway vehicle (OHV) recreation with 20% using their ATV or motorbike primarily for hunting. Idaho currently ranks third in the United States after West Virginia and Wyoming in the percent of the population participating in OHV recreation.

As a mule deer hunter, why should this increasing trend in OHV use matter to you? Simply put, increased access to our wildlands influences the number of mule deer that we have and your opportunity to hunt them. That is because increased human activities influence how effectively mule deer can use available habitat; and thereby influences reproduction, fawn survival, buck vulnerability and ultimately deer numbers.

Deer hunter numbers in Idaho haven't changed much in the past 20

years. What has changed is access. The use of four-wheel drive trucks, ATV's and motorbikes has allowed us to push into areas that were once remote, secure, and hard to get to. The result has often been fewer mature bucks, increasing conflicts between hunters, and more dissatisfied mule deer hunters.

A survey conducted by the Fish and Game in 1987 defined Idaho's highest quality hunting product as "an unroaded natural setting with an abundance of wildlife species, few other hunters, the opportunity to pursue animals of all age classes, and a chance to use and practice hunting skills with companions". Providing "unroaded settings" with "few other hunters" has become increasingly difficult over the years, but hunters



An unauthorized ATV trail (circled) on this mountain in the Targhee National Forest north of Spencer has allowed unlawful access by ATVs to areas used by big game. August 2006.

continue to let us know that these elements make for a satisfying hunting experience. The current deer hunter survey is expected to yield additional insight regarding ATVs and hunting, access, and other issues affecting hunter satisfaction.

Managing motorized vehicle use and access can have substantial benefits to mule deer and the hunting experience. While Fish and Game is working hard with programs like Access Yes! to improve access to hunting areas, managing access within those hunting areas is an important tool for providing more mature bucks and areas with lower numbers of hunters. Seasonal road closures and Fish and Game's motorized vehicle rule have been employed to help address these issues.

In Idaho, the use of motorized vehicles in our hunting areas is largely regulated by the three primary land management agencies: the U.S. Forest Service, the Bureau of Land Management, and the Idaho Department of Lands. Recently, there have been few restrictions on how motorized vehicles could be used

### Some Finer "Points" on Mule Deer

Have you ever wondered about mule deer hair? We know it changes color from one season to the next, but there is much more to it than meets the eye. As you all know, mule deer live in a variety of climates throughout the West, from forests to deserts. To help survive extreme temperature fluctuations, they have some interesting fur adaptations.

At any given time, mule deer have several different types of hair in their coat. For example, an adult mule deer coat is composed of large guard hairs, intermediate guard hairs, mane hairs, and woolly under-hairs. Fawns have tufts of white-tipped hairs.

Mule deer coats change according to the animal's age as well as to seasonal temperatures. Mule deer have four different pelages: natal (newborn), juvenile (fawn to yearling), adult summer, and adult winter. The adult winter pelage is the most complex, having all of the hair types, with each type at its greatest diameter. The summer coat does not have underfur and is longer with more slender guard hairs lying at an inclined angle to the skin. This "design" is thought to shade the skin and to provide for efficient heat loss.

Mule deer molt their coats twice a year—spring and autumn. The autumn molt occurs when deer are in their best body condition with good food resources still available, which is key to producing a warm coat sufficient to meet winter's energy demands.

(Information obtained from the Biomimicry Database at [database.biomimicry.org](http://database.biomimicry.org).)

continued on page 2

# MDI Coordinator's Report

*Toby Boudreau, MDI Coordinator, Idaho Department of Fish and Game, Southeast Region*

The big news regarding MDI progress is the Mule Deer Hunter Survey that was mailed out during the last week in January 2007. We should have the survey results by late spring. Some have asked why a survey is important to the MDI. One of the main goals of the MDI is to increase mule deer hunter satisfaction. In order to accomplish this, we have to answer some very important questions, such as what are the factors that result in a satisfactory or an unsatisfactory hunting experience. The survey also includes topics like ATVs, antlerless hunting, and should elk be managed to benefit mule deer. Additionally, the survey asks hunters how important managing for mature bucks is, and what restrictions are hunters willing to accept to manage for larger bucks.

The last time we measured the opinion and attitudes of Idaho deer hunters was in 1987. The current mule deer hunting seasons are largely based on the 1987 survey. The results from the new survey will be used to rewrite the statewide mule deer management plan to be implemented in 2008. This plan will be the basis of changing the way we manage mule deer to benefit the hunters of Idaho.

If you weren't part of the random surveys sent out to 2,800 Idaho mule deer hunters, you can still participate in the survey. Go to our website at [fishandgame.idaho.gov](http://fishandgame.idaho.gov) and click on the mule deer survey icon which appears on the home page. Your opinions are important, and we appreciate your help.

Hunting season results from checkstations varied between regions from average to below average. As we expected, there were some units that suffered a loss to the last years fawn crop due to winter mortality. Other management units surprised us with the yearling harvest exceeding our expectations based on survival of radiocollared fawns from last winter. The 2006 composition surveys continued to indicate low buck to doe and fawn to doe ratios in the Southeast Region. Magic Valley's 2006 composition counts indicated good buck and fawn to doe ratios similar to previous years. The Upper Snake Region was unable to do composition surveys for deer due to a lack of a helicopter. We will be flying the counts for estimating total deer numbers coming up in March and April. So far, this winter appears to be mild despite the lower temperatures. Our fawns that were collared in December and early January continue to do really well. Hopefully the winter continues to be mild.

In other news, we have a pile of habitat projects taking place this spring, but we are always looking for new opportunities to improve habitat. If you or someone you know has land with mule deer habitat in need of improvement, please let me or any of our habitat biologists know. The success of MDI depends on all of us working together!

Toby Boudreau ([tboudreau@idfg.idaho.gov](mailto:tboudreau@idfg.idaho.gov); 208-232-4703)

## ATVs

*continued from page 1*

on state and most federal lands. But that is starting to change. Several forest offices are going through a "travel planning" process or an in-depth review of their motorized road and trail system in response to the "National Travel Management Rule" published in the Federal Register in 2005.

The opportunity to evaluate motorized recreation on our national forests happens rarely. The implications to mule deer management and deer hunting are significant, and Fish and Game is committing substantial resources to provide recommendations that are in the best interest of mule deer and mule deer hunting. However, it is important that you, as hunters, let your opinions be known regarding travel management in your hunting area. The final decisions on motorized travel will have long-lasting effects on deer management and hunting.

The impacts to mule deer from motorized vehicles can be broadly summarized in three categories.

**Disturbance** – Many species of wildlife, including mule deer, are displaced from habitats adjacent to roads and motorized trails. In highly motorized areas, the ability of mule deer to make efficient use of otherwise suitable habitat near motorized roads and trails is compromised. The degree of displacement varies by type of activity and level of use. Research at the Starkey Experimental Station in Oregon has shown that elk are affected by motorized vehicle use at a distance of ½ mile. The effects on mule deer were not as pronounced but deer generally were displaced into habitats that may have been less suitable. Displacement from preferred habitats can affect diet and energy conservation and thus survival and reproduction.

**Buck vulnerability** – The increased popularity of OHV's combined with the lack of regulations on their use, have provided hunters access to areas that were once difficult to get to and which provided important security habitat for deer. In heavily roaded areas, bucks are harvested by hunters at higher rates affecting the numbers of mature animals in the population. In response to this issue, Fish and Game has reduced antlered permit levels in controlled hunts, implemented short general hunting seasons, restricted hunting during November, and implemented a hunting season travel regulation in some units.

**Hunting opportunity** – Hunting is one of the most important recreational activities on our public lands and should receive priority consideration in the decisions made by land management agencies. Our surveys consistently show that deer hunters want to hunt in areas where they encounter few other hunters and few motorized vehicles.

Whether you believe that there are too many roads and motorized trails in your hunting areas or not, you should let the land management agencies know your feelings. Opportunities to influence road and trail designation don't come along often. To get involved, contact the Forest Service or Bureau of Land Management office near your hunting area. Your local Fish and Game regional office can help you make the proper contacts, and are more than willing to help you to get involved.

*"Roadless areas, in general, represent some of the best fish and wildlife habitat on public lands. The bad news is that there is nothing positive about a road where fish and wildlife habitat are concerned -- absolutely nothing."*

-----Jack Ward Thomas, retired Chief of the U.S. Forest Service

# Home is Where the Habitat is

By Jennifer Jackson, Regional Conservation Educator, Idaho Department of Fish and Game, Southeast Region.

For the last four years, Craig Bute, of Farrwest, Utah, has called 2,450 acres of Idaho's landscape in South Arbon Valley "home"—at least during the times of the year when he and his family retreat to the property for some hunting and to work on their cabin. For now, their "home-away-from-home" is only half built, so Bute and his family stay in three small, 100-year old cabins—a gift from an Arbon Valley neighbor—that they painstakingly moved one log at a time to their property.

However, Bute doesn't exert all of his blood, sweat, and tears on construction of a new cabin. There is something else he is trying to build—a better place for wildlife.

"Though the purpose for buying this property was mostly recreational," says Bute, "we also want to enhance it for wildlife."

Bute's property is home to a variety of species, including sharp-tailed grouse and gray partridges, hawks, owls, foxes, coyotes, and mule deer. "Elk will move through during the winter months, and we have seen quite a few moose, too." Bute happily adds, "We think the deer and moose have really appreciated the wildlife troughs we put in."

The troughs of which he speaks are eight solar-powered wildlife guzzlers the Bute family has installed throughout the property. Other improvements have included the planting of sunflowers and forbs for deer and upland birds and removing all barbed wire cross fences. They maintain the perimeter fencing to exclude cattle from neighboring properties.

During previous ownership, about half of Bute's Arbon Valley property was used for dry grazing at one time, and the other half was in the Conservation Reserve Program—a federally funded farm program designed to take highly erosive cropland out of production. Bute has no intentions of farming the land or grazing cattle, and would like to see the CRP designation remain. His plans for the property are focused on enhancing the property for the wildlife that lives there, especially the mule deer.

Bute says, "When we first acquired the property, we would see the mule deer move in during the early spring and feed on the green grass that would be abundant in the dry grazing areas. When the grass browned, the deer would move out. So, we thought maybe there was something we could do."

About two years ago, Bute approached the Southeast Regional office of the Idaho Department of Fish and Game in Pocatello to formulate a "game plan". Fish and Game personnel

walked the site with Bute and thought that the landscape, especially the CRP land which had become a monoculture (one species) of crested wheat grass, could benefit, in part, by planting strips of alfalfa. With the USDA Farm Service Agency's approval, the project was ready to move forward in 2006 when on August 15<sup>th</sup>, lightning ignited a blaze which consumed almost the entire property. Only the Bute's partially built cabin and surrounding outbuildings survived the conflagration.

Though fall rains brought back to life the grasses and forbs from the original CRP mix, the native shrubs valuable to wildlife for food and cover such as Antelope Bitterbrush and Big Sage, will take years to recover without help. "Skeletal" remains of juniper stands and sage brush are ghostly reminders of what once had been valuable cover for

animals on the property, especially wintering mule deer.

Though the fire presented some additional challenges to the original plan for habitat improvement, the mission remained the same. So, in November 2006, Fish and Game personnel planted 2,100 Antelope Bitterbrush and 200 Hobbie Creek Sage on the Bute property. Fish and Game also contracted to have 25 acres planted with a mix of alfalfa and forbs in spring 2007.

Colin Wakefield, Mule Deer Initiative technician for Fish and Game's Southeast Region, believes joint projects like this are so important for wildlife, especially when trying to accomplish objectives outlined by the Mule Deer Initiative.

"Habitat is one of the single greatest factors affecting mule deer density and distribution," Wakefield says. "Therefore, the protection of existing mule deer habitats and improvements to poor mule deer habitat is critical to their success. By cooperating with the landowner, we [Fish and Game] were given an opportunity to make some improvements to an area of less than ideal habitat conditions."

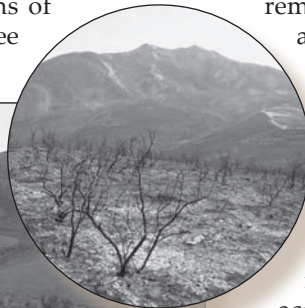
The Craig Bute Project, as it is now known, has generated real interest with some of Southeast Idaho's citizens. Wakefield says that as this project gained steam, some of Bute's neighbors also began expressing interest in



Jason Beck (left) and Paul Wackenhut (right) of the Idaho Department of Fish and Game get a chilly "ride" while planting Antelope Bitterbrush and Hobbie Creek Sagebrush on Craig Bute's property in south Arbon Valley last November.



Craig Bute's property in south Arbon Valley, Idaho, before a fire consumed valuable wildlife habitat in August 2006 (left). The same property after a fire tore through the landscape in August 2006 (right). This site is part of a habitat improvement effort being conducted by Fish and Game and the landowner.



continued on page 4

Idaho Department of Fish and Game  
600 S. Walnut  
P.O. Box 25  
Boise, ID 83707

## HABITAT

*continued from page 3*

habitat improvements for their properties. As soon as the Southeast Idaho Mule Deer Foundation (SEIMDF) learned of the project, they committed funds to plant 1,500 Utah Junipers this spring. Rick Cheatum, President of the SEIMDF says that their Board of Directors is always looking for ways to utilize their members' money to help mule deer in southeast Idaho.

Cheatum says, "If we can aid in replanting natural browse and cover for the mule deer, we are helping to restore one area that would otherwise be lost for years. A project like this is an effort to work on one piece of the puzzle of declining mule deer numbers."

After the snows melt this spring, Craig Bute will continue



*The "skeletal" remains of a sage brush stand as a reminder of the fire that consumed much of Craig Bute's property in August 2006. Fish and Game planted 200 Hobbie Creek Sagebrush (foreground) and 2100 Antelope Bitterbrush last November as a joint effort with the landowner to improve habitat for mule deer and other wildlife.*

building his cabin and, with some help, continue building better habitat for wildlife. His passion for this project stems from his belief that places for wildlife are disappearing as a result of human encroachment. Bute says, "If we don't do this [project], wildlife will have no food, no cover... there will be no wildlife."



**For more information about the Mule Deer Initiative, contact Toby Boudreau at (208) 232-4703 or visit the Fish and Game website at**

**<http://fishandgame.idaho.gov/mdi/>.**

**For questions on this newsletter, please contact Jennifer Jackson at (208) 232-4703.**